

Nehemiah 1-2

1 *The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:*

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

³ *They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."*

⁴ *When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵ Then I said:*

"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

⁸ *"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'*

¹⁰ *"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man."*

I was cupbearer to the king.

2 *In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, ² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart."*

I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

⁴ *The king said to me, "What is it you want?"*

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, ⁵ and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favour in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it."

⁶ *Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.*

⁷ I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?" ⁸ And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.

⁹ So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

¹⁰ When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days ¹² I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

¹³ By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal^[a] Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. ¹⁴ Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; ¹⁵ so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. ¹⁶ The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

²⁰ I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

I. An unexpected challenge – getting to know Nehemiah's heart

Nehemiah 1:1-11; 2:1a

In the next three days we will look together at the person of Nehemiah – concentrating on the first two chapters of the biblical book „Nehemiah“, which is actually (at least in the first part) his own report about what had happened to him... kind of an autobiography.

Nehemiah shares with us how God had met him in an unexpected way and how God had involved him in his plans.

The Big Picture: two defining events

Reading the Old Testament we find two defining events – two events that somehow summarize the story of the people of Israel (the story of God's chosen people):

- (first we have) the **Exodus**.

The story of the exodus is about the sin out there. It is the sin from which God's people suffer. In the Old Testament God's people are suffering from oppression of the Egyptians. At the beginning (when Jacob and his sons moved to Egypt) they have been welcomed by the Egyptians, but later they have been degraded to slaves, suffering terribly under the oppression of the Egyptians.

And then we read how God is judging Egypt for its sin and how he was leading his people out of Egypt into freedom.

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. (Ex 3:7)

The exodus: „the sin out there“. You can read more in the book of Exodus chap. 1-15.

- (the second defining event is) the **Exile**.

The exile is about the sin within the people of God. Sin is not only out there with the others. The prophets of the Old Testament speak about the sin among God's people:

There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. (Amos 5)

Sin is a reality among God's people as well. Sin is a reality in the heart of each individual of God's people: instead of worshipping the living God there was idolatry. Instead of following God's commands they were living a corrupt lifestyles – each of them deceitfully seeking their own advantage. Reading the prophets of the Old Testament you get a very vivid picture of the sinful hearts and the sinful behaviour of God's people.

Because of this the people of God also experience God's judgement: The loss of the promised land, Jerusalem, their capital city, is conquered by the Babylonians, the city is destroyed, the temple is destroyed, ten thousands of people are deported to places far away.

The exile: It stands for the sin in the hearts of God's people and God's judgement of the sin of his people.

The Exodus – the sin out there. The Exile – the sin in the midst of God's people. The latter (the exile) forms the backdrop to the story of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah – The Historical Context

1,1 (2,1) The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year (of the Persian King Artaxerxes), while I was in the citadel of Susa...

In such a way events were dated in the ancient world. What we read here is clearly classified as a historical event – it is the year 445 BC – The Persian city Susa is a city that exists from around 4.000 BC until today (so for more than 6.000 years already). It is located in today's Iran. The city of Susa served in those days as the winter residence of the Persian kings. – What we read in the book of Nehemiah is not fiction, no fairy tale with a morale. It is a historical report with a clear geographical and historical setting.

The 20th year of the Persian king Artaxerxes (1:1;2:1) is mentioned twice – at the beginning of chap 1 and at the beginning of chap 2. The date seems to be important: yes! But not because of Artaxerxes' reign: The date is important because it was the year when God took action to rebuild the city wall and the gates of Jerusalem... around 140 years after Jerusalem had been destroyed. God took action in the midst of human history – in the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes.

140 years before this (in the year 586 BC) the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar (the world power nr. 1 of those days) had conquered Judah. They had besieged and finally conquered the city of Jerusalem. They destroyed the city. They destroyed the temple, the dwelling place of the living God. They took away the riches of the country. And they deported many of the people to other places in the Babylonian Empire.

One of the men that was deported was Daniel. The biblical book that tells us his story starts off with a surprising note:

"the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his (Nebuchadnezzars) hand..."
(Daniel 1:2)

We learn here: Ultimately it is not Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians acting. Ultimately it is God acting – the God of the people of Israel – acting in what happens here:

- It is not the political and military power of Nebuchadnezzar that prevails.
God is the (sovereign) Lord of world history – and even world powers receive their power / military success from God's hand. In a mysterious and hidden way God's hand is behind the events of human power politics.
- More important: It is God's judgment on his people (*"the Lord gave..."*). **It is God, who stands by his word:**
"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse— the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God... the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods..." – Deut 11).
- What happens is the result of the choices they made... God calls his people to account for their actions and choices. Our actions are not indifferent. Actions have consequences (as individuals and as a society)!

This judgment is so serious that God allows his own power / existence to be called into doubt: "Doesn't this prove that the gods of the Babylonians are the more powerful gods?" "Where was Israel's God when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple, the house of God; and Jerusalem, the city of God?"

God's sovereignty is **a faithful sovereignty** – he stands by his word... even in his judgements; and it is **a humble sovereignty** – ready to suffer shame from the disobedience of his people... to make us aware of our sin and lead us to repentance. (And I ask myself: How much shame does God have to suffer because of **my** actions and behavior...!)

The Babylonians conquered Judah and its capital Jerusalem. But the Babylonian reign came to an end. Around 45 years after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem the Persians took over. They became the world power no. 1.

The Persian ruler, Cyrus, allowed groups of Israelites to return to their country... they began to rebuild the temple... and to settle back into the destroyed houses. But the city walls still lay in ruins. Which means that the inhabitants of Jerusalem were at the mercy of their enemies, unable to defend themselves against attacks and exploitation.

(allow me) **a personal note**

I grew up in Germany in the decades after WW II... This picture shows how most cities in Germany looked like at the end of the war. This one is my home city. God had judged us for our hubris, raising



ourselves above other nations and starting a war to conquer huge parts of Europe. We were judged by God for the holocaust: killing 6 million people (predominantly Jews) in the concentration camps. At the end of the war there was unimaginable destruction across all of Germany.

Eleven years after this picture was taken I was born in this very city, living in one of the houses you see here. What I want to say with this: We all are part of our nations destiny, we can't escape, even not as Christians. We are benefitting from good governance of our leaders, but probably more often we are

suffering from bad decisions of our leaders.

But make no mistake: We are often complicit with what happens. We didn't have the courage to speak up when we should have; we have been silent because we ourselves benefitted from a corrupt system; etc. (and you can find this everywhere... in politics, in the workplace, in the university, even in the church). – Each of us has our own story and sometimes these are tragic stories.

Back to Nehemiah. It was 140 years ago that the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem. Some rebuilding has been done since, but

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire. (1:3)

140 years: These are 3-4 generations: Why did God wait for such a long time? Why didn't he fix this disaster more quickly? – We don't know. – Now he takes action!

God has his own timing! And sometimes it takes pretty long. Could be years. Could be generations. But be sure: The hour will come when God takes action, fulfilling his plans.

God has struck the very land that he had given to them (the promised land); God has struck his city (Jerusalem); and he has struck his people (the people he has chosen to be a holy nation). But he has not abandoned the land, he has not abandoned the city of Jerusalem, he has not abandoned the people of Israel. And because he has not abandoned them we now see how he takes action to restore Jerusalem.

Nehemiah – a man who has made a career for himself

At the end of chap 1 Nehemiah explains to his readers:

“I was a cupbearer to the king”.

This explains why he was in Susa, the royal residence. Where ever the Persian King resided, Nehemiah had to be present: *“I was a cupbearer to the king”.*

Wow! As a foreigner he has made an incredible professional career in the Persian Empire. He had made a career for himself despite the tragic circumstances: The defeat of his nation, the deportation of his forefathers to a foreign country (hundreds of miles away from home). Displaced people: this is the destiny of tens of millions of people today!

Nehemiah himself was most likely born in Persia. But it was still a foreign culture to him. And he was surrounded by people who worshipped all kinds of gods and idols. But none of them knew the one true living God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

Nevertheless Nehemiah made it to the position of the cupbearer of the Persian King – the person who in those days ruled the world.

Nehemiah has made a career for himself, because he could be trusted. The cupbearer is the person tasting all the food and the drinks before they are served to the king. So that the king could be sure that there is no poison in the food. Kings and rulers in those days – and sometimes even today – live in constant fear to be killed.

It is a justified fear as we know from history: The fear that someone would put poison into their food. Many rulers and kings and Roman Césars lost their lives that way. There is a lot of envy and a lot of thirst for power surrounds those big rulers. That's why Artaxerxes has a cupbearer. And that person needs to be someone whom one could trust totally – someone not corruptible by bribes, someone with no own ambition for power.

Nehemiah may even have been chosen as a cupbearer because of his religion. May be (hopefully!) people from Judah (God's people!) had a reputation in Persia as trustworthy people. Nehemiah was trusted by the king. He was highly regarded by the king, because of his character, because of his integrity and loyalty. **In his job Nehemiah was reflecting the very character of his God** – even in exile in a foreign country, even in a hostile environment.

Many of us may have experienced situations that felt like exile: Being the only Christian in your class, or in your student dorm. Living among people that have completely different values.

What if we would be known there as fully trustworthy people?! What if you would be known as a fully trustworthy person, a person of integrity, a person to which important responsibilities can be entrusted – to a point that other people's lives depend on your trustworthiness. Are we people of integrity, as Nehemiah was? Would anyone entrust us with their life—as the Persian king entrusted his life to Nehemiah?

What if you would be known as one faithful in your studies, honest when it comes to exams, reflecting the very character of God in your lifestyle and in your relationships with people?! Reflecting the character of God in your university, in your workplace?!

“I was a cupbearer to the king...”

Nehemiah's question and Hanani's response

Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I asked them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” When I heard these things.... (1:2-4)

Some visitors from Judah – the home country of Nehemiah – came to Susa, all the way from Jerusalem (800 km). A man with the name Hanani was among them. A promising name: “God is gracious”. Nehemiah calls him “*one of my brothers*”. It is unclear if it was a biological brother or just a fellow countryman. I tend to the latter, but we don’t know for sure.

I asked them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem... (1:2)

“*The Jewish remnant*” – this probably refers to both – to those who had not been deported and stayed back in Judah, and also to those who were allowed to return from the exile back to Judah.

In English speaking countries I have been greeted many times with “How are you?” But many times it was just an empty phrase. The person who said this was not really interested in “how I am”. **Nehemiah is asking the question with real interest. It was a question from his heart, sympathetic with his fellow Jews far away in his homeland: “How are you?”, “How are things going at home?”**

So when you are asking someone next time “How are you?” – make sure you are serious about this question. It is an important question. It should be used seriously, with interest, with empathy. When you ask such a question you should be ready to listen carefully to how someone responds and what the person shares with you. – And Nehemiah was listening! With attention, with genuine interest.

There are so many people who are not very eager to listen to other people’s story. They rather want to talk about their own needs. Be a person that is ready to ask questions and ready to listen to other people’s stories!

Why not asking each other some time today the question “How are you?” And then you can start to share your stories with each other – both sharing and listening!

Hanani gave his report... It was a devastating report:

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” (1:3)

People had been delivered from exile... they had been allowed to go home. But home was not anymore what it used to be. They are living back home, but there was no security, they have been exposed to their enemies. They were despised and mocked at by their enemies because of their weakness, unable to defend themselves. They lived “in disgrace... in a shameful situation”, as Nehemiah will call it later.

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

So how would you respond to such a message? I was reflecting on how Nehemiah could have responded to what he just had heard:

Nehemiah – how he didn't respond to what he heard

Nehemiah could have said:

- Sorry... I have my career. Why should I care about something so far away? Why identify with the losers of history? I am now on the winner side. I have built my life here. (Many Jews would have responded like this. They found ways to live a decent life in Persia. Why should they exchange it with an uncertain future in Jerusalem?)

Nehemiah could have said:

- Well... I feel really sorry for those people. But, you know, I don't care much about politics. I only care about myself, my own life. I don't want to get involved in such business. I don't want to get myself into trouble.

Nehemiah could have said:

- If others don't care, if others do nothing about this situation – why should I? (How many people base their own actions on the passivity of others? "If they don't help why should I?")

Nehemiah could have said:

- Let's see... let's think about it. I will pray about it. May be I have an idea. May be someone comes to my mind who can do something about this situation. (Such people do not allow themselves to be moved by the suffering of others and to be touched by it.)

Nehemiah could have said:

- I am not qualified for what needs to be done. The wall of Jerusalem, the gates of the city – sorry, I am not a civil engineer, I am just a cupbearer. You need to look for the right people. I am out.

Nehemiah didn't give any quick, any cheap response. He didn't give simple answers. There was no pathetic advice for others. He also did not make any accusations: Why don't you do more? Nehemiah didn't start the blaming game – blaming others for the situation, even blaming God himself.

Let us have a look at how Nehemiah did respond:

Nehemiah – how he did respond to what he heard

We see him weeping:

"when I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days" (1:4)

His reaction was: "Their distress is my distress, their hardship is my hardship..." – What a big heart for the misery of those people in Jerusalem!

"when I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days"

It shows how deep this news affected him and touched his heart.

We have become so much used to misery and suffering that it no longer hurts us.

Nehemiah, on the other hand, allows himself to be impressed and penetrated by the pain.

Do we close our eyes to misery and say: "That's just the way it is!", or: "It's complicated!", or "This is beyond our control"... and then move on with our agenda?

Nehemiah didn't look for excuses... he did not stay out of the troubling situation that was shared with him... he didn't distance himself... he did not remain indifferent. It was clear to him: "Their distress is my distress, their hardship is my hardship..."

Nehemiah is ready to **get involved in other people's lives**. This can be costly, consuming time and energy. It requires love and patience. It requires perseverance and a lot more. Nehemiah got himself in an awful lot of trouble by saying yes to this calling. He faced all kind of resistance from the outside, but also from within. (Some of it we will see during the next days. A lot more you can discover if you read through all the chapters of the book of Nehemiah.)

Nehemiah is ready to get involved in other people's lives. But there was even more than that. He was ready to be **used by God for his purposes**, for his plans, **for God's kingdom!** Somehow it became clear to him that God is saying: "Nehemiah, I want you – I want you, Nehemiah, to get involved in this project." This is about a very personal calling: "I want you, Nehemiah, your heart, your commitment, your time, your skills."

I would hope that some of you (may be many of you) would receive a similar calling from God during the next days. A calling to serve God in the place where he put you: The university. More specifically: The people you are sitting with in the class room. May be even those – or especially those – who are not as popular as others, may be even despised (for whatever reason); or those who do not yet know the living God and Jesus as a personal saviour. Speaking more generally: I would hope that many of you would receive a calling from God to serve in God's kingdom, making yourself available to be used by God for his purposes.

This can be costly, consuming time and energy. It requires love and patience and it is a commitment to perseverance.

(Don't misunderstand this... I am not speaking about a full time Christian ministry... I am talking about "taking God's kingdom first" as a student, as a graduate in the workplace, etc.... ! It is not more spiritual to be a fulltime Christian worker or a pastor than to serve God in politics or at whatever workplace! It is just about where God wants you to serve him... And I invite you to make this your prayer (right now or later): "My God and Father, Lord Jesus Christ... here I am. I want to serve you – with all my heart... I want to be available for your plans with my life... make me a blessing to the people around me."

I would like to reflect a bit more on Nehemiah... his personality, his character, his faith:
Nehemiah's identity and loyalty

- When Hanani came from Jerusalem to visit him Nehemiah said:
"one of my brothers".

Nehemiah was born and grew up in the Persian Empire, he was educated in the Persian Empire, in their schools and universities. He has made a steep professional career. – **But he still identifies with his own people... the Jewish people from Judah:** A people that has been defeated, humiliated, that is despised by others. Still Nehemiah identifies exactly with those people: *"one of my brothers"* he says.

Nehemiah still has an identity of being part of God's people and part of God's story with his people, even in a time when those people had to walk through the 'darkest valley'.

Nehemiah's first identity was still with his homeland (though he probably never had lived in Jerusalem). He still identified with the God of Israel, with God's story with his people.. Jahwe, the God of Israel, the living God, was his identity. His ultimate loyalty belonged to him.

- The good relationship with the Persian king (Artaxerxes) – a pagan king – did not cause the relationship with God to get lost.

“King's palaces” (making it to the top) can be dangerous places for followers of Jesus. There is the temptation of power, the temptation of money and wealth, the temptation of pride in your own achievements, the temptation of glamour and luxury. These things easily can take you away from following Jesus. It may not be visible to the outside (as you still pretend to be a follower of Jesus), but in your heart other values may have taken over. Other desires may have taken over. Other priorities may have taken over.

But this didn't happen to Nehemiah: **The good relationship with the king, his high position in the most powerful empire of his days, did not cause Nehemiah's relationship with God to break down.**

- God's new calling came to him totally unexpected. It overthrew his own plans for his future (at least for the near future).

God's calling reached him in his normal profession, in a secular job, in the midst of his professional life. But it was exactly there where he had demonstrated faithfulness to God as well as trustworthiness and reliability to his boss, the king.

Nehemiah had proven himself at his workplace as a servant of the king, but also as a servant of God. He was the same in both worlds (the world of the palace of a pagan king and the world of God's community. – This is what we call integrity.

Many believers lose their identity as followers of Christ when they are in the university or in the workplace. They don't want to be different, to stand out. They adapt to their environment – may be afraid of scorn, may be afraid of being an outsider. Or (the other way around) they separate themselves completely from what they call “the world” and live in a Christian bubble.

Nehemiah was able to connect both worlds. He was the same in both worlds. He was able to live the values of God's kingdom in the king's palace. Amazing! Jesus has called this: living in the world but not of the world.

Do people at the university or at your workplace know who you are? Do you let your identity as a follower of Christ, your values shine through?

Nehemiah was a servant of God – in the palace of king Artaxerxes as well as when he worshipped his God in God's community. He was the same in both worlds.

- One more amazing thing: **We find Nehemiah at the centre of the political power at that time. But at the same time, he had a heart for the powerless, the disadvantaged, and the despised.** Amazing!

The completely unexpected challenge that God brought into the life of Nehemiah: It was a test of where his heart is at. Is his heart with God? Is his heart with the people of God? Is his heart with the story that God has with his people?

May God give us such hearts and give grace to live such lives – as Nehemiah did. Amen.

II. An amazing prayer – getting to know God’s heart

The theme yesterday was: “An unexpected challenge – getting to know Nehemiah’s heart.”

And we looked mainly at the first few verses of chap 1 of the book of Nehemiah. The theme today is: “An amazing prayer – getting to know **God’s heart**.”

Looking at the rest of chap 1 we will get to understand a lot more about Nehemiah – especially about his faith. But we also will get a deep insight in who God is: Who God is in his very character.

Many people read the Bible with the question: What shall I do? What do I have to do? I don’t think that this should be our first question when we approach a passage from the Bible. And I also don’t think that it is the most important question as we read the Bible.

Our first question always should be: “God, who are you? Help me to understand more of you! Reveal to me your very heart! I want to get to know you!”

Looking today at Nehemiah’s prayer we get to know a lot about Nehemiah and his prayer life. But still I think that the first focus as we look at Nehemiah’s prayer should be: “getting to know God’s heart”.

Nehemiah – taking what he has heard to God

“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.” (1:4)

Nehemiah sat down. He took time to process. All other things he put aside for the moment. He wept. – Do you know who else wept for Jerusalem? It was Jesus himself – 450 years after Nehemiah’s prayer. In Luke 19 we read:

“As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but... you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

Jesus weeps over Jerusalem:

“... you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

What a tragic! The living God became man in Jesus Christ. He lived among his people, proclaiming the good news, healing the sick, driving out demons, forgiving sin, inviting people into the eternal kingdom. – But there have been so many people who failed to recognize what is at stake for them: They miss out on God coming into our world and into their lives. What a tragic!

May be this conference is the time of God’s coming to you. The time when he wants to meet you, when he wants to come into your life! Don’t miss this moment! Don’t miss God’s coming into your life! – Nehemiah was totally aware that this is God’s moment. God’s moment to involve him, Nehemiah, in HIS, God’s, plans.

“... For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven... , let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night...” (1:4.6)

That the people in Jerusalem are “in great trouble and disgrace” has deeply touched his heart. But he didn’t react with blind activism. He didn’t say: “There is a lot to do... let’s make a plan, let’s get started.”

Nehemiah's initial focus was not on thinking in terms of human power or political power. He did not go to his boss, the Persian king. No: He went to the King of kings. He seeks answers to the questions of his heart in God's presence.

Wow! Despite a career in the political realm of the Persian empire, despite a career in a pagan environment he still knew his God, he still knew how to connect with him and talk to him.

Nehemiah was concerned about the suffering people in Jerusalem – yes. But there was also something else – something even bigger than this: He was concerned about God’s name and honour. The people of Jerusalem were not just any people. They were God’s chosen people! Jerusalem was not just any city. It was God’s city, the city in which God has chosen to take up his dwelling:

“... the place I, God, have chosen as a dwelling for my Name” (1:9)

It was about God’s glory: Should HE be exposed to the mockery of other nations? It was about God’s story (his story of salvation): Should this story get nowhere, ending up in a dead end? Should his plans for the salvation of a fallen humanity, of the restoration of his creation fail? – Are we people that are concerned for God’s glory?

Nehemiah sensed: There is a lot more at stake than just helping some people in trouble. It is about *“the place God has chosen as a dwelling for his Name”*.

And therefore Nehemiah *“...fasted and prayed before the God of heaven...”* (1:4). He put everything else aside and opened his empty hands to God in prayer. I am sure that Nehemiah didn’t start a prayer life in that moment. I am sure he was a man of prayer. And because he was a man of prayer he was able to respond to this situation in prayer!

Prayer is the risk that God sets new priorities in your life. Nehemiah was led out of a brilliant career, at least for some time. There was no safety net, there was no guarantee that things will work out successfully. Prayer means: Making ourselves available to God, making ourselves available for God’s plans with our life, entrusting our lives to God, trusting that HE will not let us down.

The prayer we read here in Nehemiah chap 1 is probably a summary of all the prayers that Nehemiah was praying in the days and weeks to come. It was rather kind of a prayer journey: Talking to his God, listening, responding, asking again. And bit by bit understanding God in a better and deeper way. Bit by bit understanding God’s purposes in a better and deeper way. – There is no short cut. The prayer here in Nehemiah 1 can not be used as kind of a magical prayer that guarantees us success. It will not replace your personal honest prayer and prayer life that you have with God. Prayer is not magic. It doesn’t require a special form. It is a conversation between us and God and God and us. It is also not about winning God over for our plans: It is about God opening our heart for his plans.

If I would describe this prayer journey of Nehemiah I would describe it as “a journey from the news he had received to the reality of his God”. A journey from the reality in front of his eyes (the people in Jerusalem in great trouble and disgrace) to a new reality: Keeping in front of his eyes God’s story with the people of Israel in the past, and keeping in front of his eyes God’s promises. It was a prayer nourished by contemplation of the Holy Scriptures.

Nehemiah is reminding himself of God’s promises and of who God is

The report of Hanani represented a devastating reality:

“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” (1:3)

Nehemiah does not allow himself to be caught up in this reality. He finds a path to God’s promises: He is reminding himself of God’s promises and he is reminding himself of a faithful God who keeps his promises. And even more: He reminds God of HIS promises! Let’s work through this together:

- **“LORD”** (= Adonai... Yahweh) – It is the God who had revealed himself to the people of Israel. It is the God who started a story with Abraham, a story of salvation:

“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

This was God’s promise to Abraham.

- **“The God of heaven”** – God is not competing with the idols and gods we create. He is a category of his own. In chap 9 of his book Nehemiah will confess:

You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you. (9:6)

There is no equal to the living God, to God the Creator. No one can compete with him.

The book of Revelation (the last book of our Bible) provides us with a wonderful image that illustrates this. John writes in chap 4:

“... there before me was a door standing open in heaven... and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.”

Looking at our world we may ask: Is there someone in control? Did God start the whole thing and somehow lose control? All the powers here on earth: political superpowers, terrorism, all the small dictators? Are they in control? Or the powers of nature: natural disasters, fires, floods, earthquakes? Pressing questions!

John sees heaven open. And in the midst of the picture he sees God. He sees God, the creator of heaven and earth, sitting on a throne. *A throne in heaven with someone sitting on it*: This throne is not empty, even if it sometimes feels like that. God is on the throne, he reigns, he runs the universe, he is the Almighty, he is in control. Neither today’s world powers, nor Satan, nor any other forces are in charge. No! There is a throne in heaven, and it is God, who is on the throne. – What a wonderful image. What a wonderful assurance that our God is the all-powerful, the one without equal! The “God of heaven”.

- **“The great and awesome God”** – He can not be domesticated by us. He is not there to fulfill our wish list. At the same time: He has the power to help and to save. And as the faithful and the loving One he will help and he will save!
- **“A covenant of love”**

“who keeps his covenant of love...” (1:5)

That’s the motive behind everything that God is doing: Love!!! A covenant: God invites into a covenant. God invites into a relationship. He made a covenant with the people of Israel:

“... who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments” (1:5)

Nehemiah is realising the reason for the disaster... You, God, have been faithful! But we have broken the covenant, as we didn’t keep (as we didn’t care about) your commandments. God takes the sin of his people very very seriously: He gave his people, he gave Jerusalem over to defeat, to destruction. The people had to suffer 70 years of exile as a consequence for their sin:

“... who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments” (1:5)

But this is not the end of the story. The phrase “covenant of love” still reveals a lot more. Yes, God invites into a covenant. God invites into a relationship. First the people of Israel. But finally all of us! When Jesus celebrated the Passa meal with his disciples in the night before he was crucified he said:

“this is the new covenant in my blood” – “a covenant of love”.

His love drove him to the cross. **So that even sinners could belong. So even you and I could belong.** By dying on the cross in our place Jesus worked out forgiveness! That’s the deepest meaning of this phrase “covenant of love”.

It is not a cheap forgiveness. It is not a cheap love. It is a costly love, a love that God spelled out on the cross. We only see how seriously God takes sin when we look at the cross! My sin would have been enough to bring Jesus to the cross! We do not recognize our sin when we look at

ourselves. You may still think you are a pretty good guy. We only recognize the depth of our sin when we look at Jesus on the cross. – But equally: We only see how big God’s love is when we look at the cross!

What a big thing: To be invited by the living God to enter his covenant of love. Even me, even you! A covenant based on his death on the cross!

- The result of this is that there is always an open door to return to God – regardless of what happened, regardless of how deep we failed.

Think of the prodigal son (from the parable that Jesus told in Luke 15): The son was running away. He said: “Father, I can’t wait until you die. I need my share of the estate now. I need to live now. I want to be able to live my life my way.” By how he acted he brought shame on his father. It was shameful to wish his father dead. – But even for him there was still an open door to come back home. When he was running out of money he decided to go home to his father. And then we read: *“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him...”*

The father hadn’t forgotten him – just the opposite: He was waiting for him! He still had a place in his heart for his son! *“He ran to his son...”* – It is the love and the compassion for his son that makes him run, that longs to have him back. And the father *“ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”* **That’s the Gospel!** The Father (God himself) running to us – that’s Jesus, that’s the **incarnation**. The Father embracing us and kissing us and taking upon himself our shame – that’s Jesus on the **cross**: The outstretched arms of the Father, inviting us home!

A waiting Father, a running Father, a sinner embracing Father, a sinner kissing Father – a Father, a God, that takes upon himself our shame. **In Jesus the heavenly Father, the Holy One, embraces and welcomes sinners! That’s God’s “covenant of love”!**

Nehemiah is reminding God of his promises... taking God at his word...

Nehemiah reminds **himself** of God’s story with his people. He remembers the Exodus, when God freed his people from slavery and oppression in Egypt:

“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.” (1:10)

This story is not like any story. It is **the** story. It is God’s salvation story for the redemption of all of mankind. Well, Nehemiah didn’t have the full picture yet (as we now do, knowing about Jesus), but somehow he sensed that there is something unique about God’s story with the people of Israel.

Nehemiah recalls this story. But then he also reminds God of it. **He reminds God of his history with the people of Israel. He reminds God of his promises: God, remember!**

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’ (1:8-9)

I imagine a conversation between Nehemiah and God:

“God you have promised that you will take care of your people” (says Nehemiah). “I trust that you are reliable in keeping your promises. I take you at your word!”

God responds:

“Nehemiah, the reason I did send Hanani to you, that I moved your heart: All of this shows that I have not yet abandoned my people. It shows that I already have taken action – despite all what happened!

“... compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” – THIS IS MY NAME.

And God continues:

“Nehemiah, there is always just the one thing I have in mind:

... (to) bring them (my people) to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name...” to bring them into my presence...” (1:8)

God had made a „dwelling for his name“ on earth! God wanted to live among his people, to be present among his people. He is not a distant God, not far away in heaven. He made his dwelling among his people so that they could meet him, so that they could live in his presence:

There was **the arc** (that the people of Israel carried with them during their desert walk). There was later **the temple** in Jerusalem: *“... the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name”*

And actually this is the whole point of rebuilding the wall and the gates of Jerusalem. God wants his people to live in peace and in freedom so that they can live in his presence and worship him in

“... the place (God himself) has chosen as a dwelling for His Name”

Still: to bring the people of Israel back to Jerusalem, back to the temple was just a temporary step. A little bit more than four centuries later God took another step to dwell among his people:

„The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...”

we read in the gospel of John. God became a human being... living among us... Jesus is this „word that became flesh... **Jesus, the God with us, the God among us.**

- “Nehemiah, there is always just the one thing I have in mind:
... (to) bring my people to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name... to bring them into my presence.”

Today he is saying to us: There is always just the one thing I have in mind for you:

(to) bring you to the place of my presence. And since God became man in Jesus Christ, since he gave his **Holy Spirit**, his presence is never further away than just a short prayer: “Come Lord Jesus, come Holy Spirit into my life! I want to walk with you, I want to worship you, I want to be a dwelling place for your Name in this world, in my university!”

Isn't this absolutely amazing?!

You – each one of us – can become a dwelling place for God's name.

Jesus is God making a dwelling place for his name in our world as a human being. He came to live among us. The Holy Spirit is God making a dwelling place for his name in us – in you and in me! You as a child of God, we as God's community in this world have become the place of God's presence in our world – representing HIM to the world around us!

Nehemiah – placing himself under God's judgment

We encounter something in Nehemiah's prayer that may be foreign to us. He prays:

“I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.” (1:6-7)

Nehemiah puts himself on the side of those who were disobedient against God's commands:

“including myself... including myself and my father's family”.

Nehemiah wasn't even born yet when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. He could have said: I have nothing to do with that story. But Nehemiah is very aware that he is not any better than those who had come before him. He is very aware that the story of the people of Israel can be described as: Constantly experiencing God's goodness and faithfulness and constantly responding with disobedience.

Later in the story of Nehemiah – when the wall was completed – we read a long prayer of confession (actually a whole chapter... chap 9). The people of Israel are confessing their sins:

"... the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

The Israelites confess their sins. But it had started with the leader. It had started with Nehemiah. And if it would not have started with Nehemiah the Israelites would not have come to that point of confession.

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you."

Nehemiah is not looking at other people's failure. He is not blaming others for the disaster. He says: *"including myself"*. I remember that at a staff conference in Germany we complained to an older leader that it is so tough to do evangelistic ministry at the universities in our country, such a hard soil for the gospel to take root. His response was (quite sobering): "Don't look to the outside, to others. The hardest soil is always our own heart!" (I think he was right.)

450 years after Nehemiah, someone came who identified with the sin of all generations before him and all generations after him: it was God himself. Let me use the following story to illustrate this:

John the Baptist, the one who prepared the way for Jesus, was preaching in the wilderness, calling people to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Lots of people came. They confessed their sin and were baptised by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Sinful people enter the Jordan. Their sins are washed away in the waters of the Jordan. Purified of sin they come out of the Jordan again.

But then one day **Jesus** comes to the Jordan. The son of God. **The one without sin**. But he insists that he too be baptised. And the one without sin enters the Jordan (the waters filled with the sin of all those who have been baptised there before him – and actually the sin of all men and women of all the ages – including yours and mine). The one without sin enters the Jordan, taking upon himself the sin of all of humanity: *"This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"* says John the Baptist. And Jesus walks away and takes the sin to the cross.

Such is the way that God himself identified with our sin! This is still so much more than what Nehemiah did and was able to do. God himself was dealing with our sin in an amazing way. He has opened the way to forgiveness for us. He has opened for us the way to redemption.

I summarize

We have looked together at this amazing prayer of Nehemiah. But it wasn't just about the words of this prayer. It was about Nehemiah's attitude behind this prayer. It was the attitude of his heart that is revealed to us as we see him praying and as we listen to his prayer.

And as we listen to this prayer we also get to know **God's heart**:

- a God who keeps his promises – a faithful God, a trustworthy God,
- a God who is „the God of heaven“ – the One ultimately in power,
- a God that identifies with our sin – taking our sin upon himself and dying on the cross on our behalf, so that we may live: *"this is the new covenant in my blood"* – a God who made "a covenant of love" with his people, with you and me,
- a God who does not want to remain distant, but who makes his dwelling among us and even in us: Making us his presence in our world, making you his presence in your university! And as he makes his dwelling in us, he is building us into his likeness: Making you representing HIS character and love in your family and in your university. What a God! His grace and peace be with you! Amen.

III. An overwhelming project – the generosity of a king and the gracious hand of God (Nehemiah 2,1-20)

Introduction

Nehemiah, a Jewish man who grew up far away from home. His parents or even grandparents had been deported from their homeland (Judah with its capitol Jerusalem). Nehemiah made a career for himself, becoming the cupbearer of Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, the most powerful ruler of his time.

We got to know Nehemiah and his heart – a heart with compassion for his fellow countrymen back in Jerusalem, living in „*great trouble and disgrace*“.

But in Nehemiah's heart there was also a deep concern for God's glory. He was concerned for God's story with the people of Israel not to fail. A story in which God has promised (to Abraham) that „*all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*“ (Genesis 12:1-4) – through the people of Israel. A promise which finally came to its fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, in his death and resurrection.

We also got to know Nehemiah as a man of prayer. And in this prayer we encountered God himself... his character, his heart, his love, his plans for the salvation of all of humanity.

Now let's take it one step further.

Nehemiah – asking the King to move the heart of the king

The last request in the prayer of Nehemiah was (1:11):

“Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.”

Nehemiah knew that he needed the permission of his boss if he wanted to get involved with the building of the city wall in Jerusalem. And this was indeed a pretty tricky thing.

A couple of years ago Artaxerxes had ordered that the rebuilding of the city wall had to be stopped. Opponents – rulers of neighbouring provinces have defamed the people of Israel... They have written a letter to Artaxerxes; accusing the residents of Jerusalem of planning a revolt against the king:

„This city is a rebellious city, troublesome to kings and provinces... this city has a long history of revolt against kings...” they wrote (Ezra 4:15.19).

And as a response to this letter Artaxerxes had issued an order that the work had to be stopped.

(You can read in more detail about this in the book Ezra, chapter 4.)

So why should Artaxerxes change his opinion? Nehemiah was very aware of this situation. That's why he is praying:

„Give your servant success... by granting him favour in the presence of this man...” (1:11).

Nehemiah knew: God can even move the hearts of kings! Even in a matter that requires them to rethink and to change what they have ordered before. – Later he will say: *“... because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests...”* (2:8).

Artaxerxes could have easily stopped the whole project. He had the power to deny to Nehemiah the journey to Jerusalem. But again and again we see in how the story unfolds how God (*“the gracious hand of God”*) opened up doors that seemed to be closed and even worked in the heart of the most powerful ruler of that time. To a point that we read:

“It pleased the king to send me...” (2:6)

Nehemiah – sadness of heart

What we read in chapter 2 happened four months after Nehemiah had received the news about the devastating situation of the people in Jerusalem. There have been four long months of praying and waiting for the right moment... waiting for God's moment. It required patience.

Waiting for God to answer our prayers and to act can be challenging. We rather would like God to respond immediately to our prayers.

But there is also the beauty of waiting. Waiting does something to us. The things we are concerned with can mature in our hearts. God can work in our hearts and help us to get the right perspective on things. So that we don't judge and act premature. Actually, if we don't learn to wait, we will not mature. There is the beauty of waiting for God's timing, waiting for God to open doors that we can't open. Otherwise we may just hit the wall.

It was clear to Nehemiah: **I will talk to the king (to Artaxerxes) only after I have talked to the King of kings. And I will wait for the right moment, without forcing anything at my end.**

I am sure that Nehemiah was praying: God, please, please move the heart of Artaxerxes, give the right moment to talk to him, give me courage once this moment comes to speak up, and give wisdom to find the right words. – And Nehemiah has experienced: God opens doors.

It was somehow „business as usual“ on that day:

“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king...” (2:1).

But something had happened to Nehemiah during the past weeks: The whole situation has deeply affected him: the news he had received, his journey of prayer with the living God... knowing that God had called him to get involved personally...

At the same time: How should this work out? – „Lord, you have to work this out... somehow...“. And the Lord worked it out... in a way that Nehemiah probably had not expected:

“... I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” (2:1-2)

On that day Nehemiah was no longer able to hide his „sadness of heart“ – that is how the king rightly called what he saw in Nehemiah's face: a sadness of heart.

“... I took the wine and gave it to the king.”

It was on the one hand business as usual, but it also was God's timing! God opened up the opportunity, not forced by Nehemiah but prepared by constant prayer.

Fear of man and fear of God: the kings and the King of kings

“... the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart. I was very much afraid...” (2:2)

Now everything is at stake – will the thumb of the king go up or down? Nehemiah knew that he had only one shot and that he should not blow it.

„How will the king react when I share with him what is going on in my heart? How will he react when I tell him that it is about rebuilding the city wall of Jerusalem – an undertaking he himself had strongly forbidden some years ago. Can I really dare to challenge the king's edict?“ – It took a lot of courage for Nehemiah to speak up!

*“I was very much afraid... **but** I said to the king...” (2:2-3)*

„Very much afraid (yes), **but...**“ – **Nehemiah was not ultimately guided by fear of people, but by fear of God.**

How much do we let ourselves be guided by fear of other people? By what others may think or say about me? By my reputation with people? Is my fear of men bigger than my fear of God? – What would we be able to do if our fear of God would be bigger than our fear of men!

With Nehemiah it was the other way around... we read:

“Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king...” (2:4-5)

In his heart Nehemiah was praying to the God of heaven; with his mouth he was responding to the king. What a great way to be connected to the King of kings as you have to deal with the earthly kings: *“... I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king...”* – Think about it when you talk to your professors or other authorities.

„What is it you want?“ the king asks Nehemiah.

A one time chance... a one time opportunity... an open door – granted by God, moving the heart of a powerful ruler. God can move the heart even of kings, even of the most powerful rulers.

But let me add: In the end it is not the favour or disfavour of the rulers of this world God depends on. If necessary, the church (the Christian community) can live without the goodwill of the rulers of this world, the church lives from God's grace alone.

A big project – asking for letters and making provision

It becomes obvious... In the past weeks Nehemiah had not just prayed about this project, he also had started to think through carefully what such a project would involve in terms of preparation, in terms of resources etc. – There was prayer, but there was also diligence in thinking through and starting to plan the project... Nehemiah took prayer seriously. But he also took organisational matters seriously.

When Nehemiah had the opportunity to talk to the king about the project, he was not taken by surprise, he was not unprepared: Nehemiah already had a good amount of clarity on what it needs to start the project.

Nehemiah made two requests to the king:

“If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” (2:7-8)

The first request was about „**safe-conduct**“. Safe conduct refers to a document that will allow Nehemiah to travel through all of the Persian empire without fear of harm or arrest... even in areas with provincial leaders that may be hostile to him and that may oppose the project that Nehemiah is about to undertake.

And we can see that this precaution was far from unnecessary:

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites. (2,10)

Artaxerxes even granted Nehemiah an escort for his protection... a massive escort:

“The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me...” (2:9).

It was a dangerous trip... Having letters securing safe-conduct was important.

The second request was about **building material** for the rebuilding of the city wall and the gates. Nehemiah already had reflected on the resources he will need for the project.

In the past weeks Nehemiah not only was in a conversation with his God. He probably also was in conversation with people who had some expertise in what is necessary for such a project. –

Nehemiah took planning seriously.

And he had the courage to approach the king with these two requests, clearly knowing that in the end it is God who moves the heart of the king. He says:

“... because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.”

A big project – opposition and obstacles

Those who build God’s kingdom will face opposition. There are forces that are not interested in allowing God to take over in people’s lives or to establish Christian values in our societies.

There are external threats and opposition. (But don’t be mistaken: there is also internal opposition, as other chapters in the book of Nehemiah show.)

Three names are explicitly mentioned: Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem (2:10.19). All of them are minor rulers under the Persian reign. They got quite alarmed when they heard about what is happening. They were not interested in the welfare of Jerusalem. They were not interested in the fact that these exiles would be able to build a dignified life for their families.

Rebuilding the city wall will give the people of Judah, especially the citizens of Jerusalem an identity as a nation, establishing them as an independent province. They will no longer live in fear to be constantly suppressed and exploited by the surrounding provinces and their rulers.

Those three provincial rulers – Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are afraid that the balance of power may change to their disadvantage. They are afraid of losing political influence. They fear no longer to benefit from (corrupt) economical structures that they have established: The trade routes running through their territories which provide a good income from the taxes they can take. They just wanted to keep their little privileges. That is why they wanted to prevent Judah from becoming an independent and powerful province again at all costs.

Political power struggles, fighting for your own influence, keeping others small and weak so that you can shine, making sure that the money flows into your pockets and not in the pockets of others: It happens in politics all the time, all over the world, to various degrees. But it does not just happen in politics. Sadly it also can happen in churches and it also happens in Christian communities.

To get involved with the wall of Jerusalem also meant to get involved with those (many times) dirty games of people striving for power and influence:

“... they mocked and ridiculed us...” (2:19)

This can be very demotivating. But Nehemiah knows: „If God is with us we will succeed... what ever opposition we will face.“

A big project – clarity about the task ahead

There have been “letters and provision”, but it will take even more.

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem but nothing spectacular happens. He makes not a big splash about his arrival. No, just the opposite: Nehemiah is silent about the project... only further processing it in his own heart:

“I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart...” (2:11-12)

And then Nehemiah is inspecting the wall together with a small group of people. Probably people who had a better understanding and knowledge of the place than he himself. Nehemiah didn’t just want to depend on information he had received from others. He wanted to see with his own eyes.

Nehemiah makes a reality check. He didn't want to have illusions about the scale of the task. He didn't want to walk around with rose-coloured glasses.

As we already have seen: **Nehemiah is not only a prayerful man. He also is a very thoughtful and carefully planning person. He takes organisation as important as prayer. Both – prayer and organisational stuff – are spiritual disciplines!**

Nehemiah is also not over-spiritualising: He doesn't say "let us just pray enough... God will do the rest".

A big project – communicating the vision

Nehemiah knows: „I can't do it all on my own...“. He didn't think: „I can and will do it all by myself... I know better what to do and how to do it...“. No, he was aware that he will depend on so many others to get involved. So finally he talked to them:

“... the Jews... the priests... the nobles, the officials or any others who would be doing the work. – Then I said to them...” (2:16-17)

Convincing the inhabitants of Jerusalem of God's project, to win them over for the project so that they get involved: This may be the most challenging part of the task.

It was just as crucial a moment as the one before the king in Susa. How would the leaders and the influential people respond to the project presented to them? How would all the others respond? Nehemiah would have had to return to Susa without having achieved anything if people will not join in and take ownership.

Now the time had come to communicate the vision and to involve all those people:

““You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.” (2:17-18)

What is Nehemiah doing? How is he communicating the vision of this project?

- **Nehemiah identifies with the people in Jerusalem**

He does not accuse them: „Why didn't you do anything about it over all these years?“. He identifies with them: *“You see the trouble **we** are in...”*... acknowledging that he himself is (just as the others) part of this miserable and pitiful group of people... not referring to the splendor of the royal court that he had enjoyed every day.

“You see the trouble we (together) are in...”

- **Nehemiah provides them with an honest assessment of the situation:**

“You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire.”

But at the same time he helps them to see more than only rubble, dirt, and dust.

- **Nehemiah reminds them about their God:**

I have experienced „the gracious hand of God on me“, Nehemiah says. He is witnessing how he experienced God's intervention: God has taken initiative, he touched my heart, he touched the heart of Artaxerxes, the Persian king. Even more than that: God is about to continue his story with Jerusalem, his story with his people.

So: Remember all of God's great promises! God has not forgotten you. The living God is behind this project. It is not my idea. It is His idea!

Remember: Jerusalem is not any city. It is God's city. It is the city which God has chosen as his dwelling place on earth!

- **Nehemiah invites and encourages them to join the project:**

„Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem“. (2:17)

And then we read:

„They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.“ (2:18)

Let me summarize:

Nehemiah is building conviction instead of using moral pressure or any orders. He wants people to join in by their own conviction. He wants them to take real ownership... not just following orders.

Nehemiah invites to own the vision: It is God who is calling us... it is God himself who is behind this project. And he shares a vision of God himself... of God's intentions, of God's character... testifying to „God's gracious hand“ that he had experienced.

And God gave: depression turned into motivation, resignation turned into hope, isolation (“I care only about myself”) turned into togetherness.

Nehemiah is not the kind of leader that is pushing people forward. He wants (and allows) people to make a choice by themselves. This is important! There will be a lot of difficulties coming up along the work on this project. There will be discouragements, there will be attacks from the outside, but also from within. People will be tempted to quit... etc. etc.

In such moments it is important to know: „I was not talked into this against my will... it was God's calling to me and I accepted his calling... and because of this I will persevere.

The healthiest way to lead is leading through **personal authority**, not with **role authority**. If you lead with **role authority** (claiming: „I am the appointed leader and therefore you have to do what I say“), people have to obey your commands or your orders. But this does not create ownership. People will just follow your orders but without personal conviction, they will just follow the rules. – **Personal authority** is authority you earn by humility, with your integrity, with your character. It is an authority that you don't claim but that is freely granted to you. If you lead with personal authority you have no power to impose anything on others, no power to force them to do anything. People follow you because they themselves have caught the vision. They do it not for you. They do it for Jesus! This is a much healthier and a lot more effective and sustainable way to execute leadership.

When Nehemiah shared the vision the people felt that they themselves were important, not just the top leader. Nehemiah made them feel valued, made them feel as essential parts of a community endeavor. Nehemiah reinforced the conviction, “With God's help, we can do it!”

Nehemiah is neither a “do it all yourself person” (as quite a lot of church leaders)... nor someone who leads with orders. He is involving others (actually everybody as we will see), and he leads with his personal example.

Nehemiah was at this point of history the man that God had chosen to take forward his story, his plans for the salvation of the world. We have seen the amazing way in which he has served his God: an amazing character, an amazing heart for his people – people who had been despised and degraded by others.

What if we would fill our place in God's plans! What if you would fill your place in God's plan – as Nehemiah did!

God's amazing story

In the decades and centuries after Nehemiah, God's story with his people continued, moving bit by bit towards the climax of God's salvation story.

Nehemiah was rebuilding the gates of the city of Jerusalem. A bit more than 450 years later God's Messiah, Jesus, entered the city of Jerusalem through one of those gates. He didn't enter the city in a triumphalistic manner. Just the opposite: He entered the city utterly humble, riding on a donkey. Jesus didn't come to conquer, he didn't come to exercise power over the nations in a way that he would impose his rule on them or even violently force people to submit to him.

No, Jesus came in humility and he came to serve:

“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10,45)

Jesus came with humility. Jesus came to serve... to a point that he decided rather to endure suffering than to inflict suffering. A few days after he entered Jerusalem through one of these gates they forcibly led him out of Jerusalem through one of these gates – nailing him to the cross.

At the cross:

That’s where Jesus was crowned as King of kings – with a crown of thornes!

That’s where Jesus received his Lordship!

That’s where Jesus received his glory! His glory are the nail marks in his hand and feet.

That’s when Jesus received the nations as his inheritance from the hand of the heavenly Father.

That’s the Jesus we follow! That’s the Jesus we serve! And we serve him as we serve our nation:

With the same humility, with the same faithfulness, with the same love. Pointing with our words and live to Jesus.

It is through us that he wants to win over the nations: So that they recognize and worship HIM as their Lord and Saviour.

Our God may give you grace to fill your place at this time of God’s story, as Nehemiah did in his time!
Amen.